Literacy and workplace communication: a South African technikon perspective

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ABSTRACT
To acquire literacy is much more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorising sentences, words or syllables, lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe, but rather an attitude of creation and recreation, a self transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. The words of Paulo Freire illuminate a view of literacy that is purposeful, contextual and transformative. It places the learner rather than the teacher or the text at the centre of the literacy process and it defines this process as more than the skills associated with reading and writing per se. Literacy is understood as a creative activity through which learners can begin to analyse and interpret their own lived experiences, make connections between those experiences and those of others. In this sense literacy is intimately connected to language itself, grounded in the historical and cultural background of the learner, and centred in the personal and social construction of meaning. The author offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. One cannot pretend that cultural and ideological assumptions are neutral and universal. Educators should suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among their students, until they are able to understand what it means to the students themselves and from which social contexts reading and writing derive their meaning. Literacy must not be seen as simply a neutral skill, practiced in the same manner all over the world. The ideological model of Prinsloo and Breier (1996), recognise that educational and policy decisions have to be based on prior judgements regarding what type of literacy to impart to students in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment and why. It must be pointed out that unlike most countries in the world where English second language students are usually in the minority, in South Africa they form the large majority. It is in this context that this article has been written.

INTRODUCTION
A technikon in the South African context is a tertiary institution providing quality career oriented education in the following disciplines: Arts, Commerce, Engineering and Science. Besides a wide range of courses up to diploma level, the Technikon also offer programmes leading to the award of Bachelor of Technology (BTech), Master of Technology (MTech) and Doctor of Technology (DTech). The vision of the ML Sultan Technikon in particular is “to be a world class education institution of technology for entrepreneurial leadership” (MLST Prospec tus 2001:1).

“Language, literacy and communication are intrinsic to human development and central to lifelong learning” (Wessels & Van den Berg 1998:6). So is language and culture two indivisible features of human lifestyle. Discourse around literacy in South Africa focuses on the connection between literacy and empowerment. In South Africa we need to recognise the evolution of native varieties of English where in particular aspects of non native Englishes are slowly being defined and gaining recognition. The myth of the native speaker as the only valid and reliable source of language data should be dropped, since much of the world’s verbal communication takes place by means of languages that are not the user’s “mother tongue” but his/her second, even third language. We need a worldview of English, which recognises that it no longer belongs exclusively to its native speakers. I believe that when any language becomes international in character it cannot be bound to any one culture. It cannot be owned by its native speakers. However, this does not mean that educators ignore grammatical competency and intelligibility in speaking and writing. English first language speakers should learn tolerance for different pronunciation patterns as well as the ways in which non mother tongue speakers of English structure information. This implies that the English language has to be denationalized. There is no room for linguistic chauvinism (Chew 1991:43).

In South Africa the view is widely held that the literacy skill demands of jobs are increasing while the basic skills of the available workforce are decreasing.
We need a vocational educational system, which deliver the new basic skills industry needs, but in an applied technological setting. This applied level of literacy is referred to as "functional literacy". An understanding of everyday experiences and practice is essential to facilitate communication and provide appropriate starting points within the learning context. In addition one must be able to apply those strategies that permit individuals to adapt information and skills for use in familiar as well as unfamiliar contexts. The implication is that our concept of training should move beyond that of training students in single, static skills to one of preparing students to function in complex, ever changing environments. The challenge facing us in South Africa is to develop suitable programmes and teaching resources and to integrate language and literacy teaching with other skills training.

THE DYNAMICS OF LITERACY

Literacy according to Freire (1973) should be purposeful, contextual and transformative. It places the learner rather than the teacher or the text at the centre of the literacy process and it defines this process as more than the skills associated with reading and writing. Literacy is understood as a creative activity, through which learners can begin to analyse and interpret their own lived experiences, make connections between these experiences and those of others. In this sense literacy is intimately connected to language itself, grounded in the historical and cultural background of the learner and centred in the personal and social construction of meaning (Freire 1973). The ideological model as referred to by Prinsloo and Breier (1996) recognises that educational and policy decisions have to be based on prior judgements regarding what type of literacy to impart to learners in culturally and linguistically diverse environments and why. Today’s workforce needs high levels of literacy skills in order to compete in the international market. Much of the development literature assumes that as people acquire literacy their cognitive faculties will be enhanced. Also that they will automatically become modernised, progressive and rational. Recent research however has challenged this assumption that one cannot simply impose western conceptions of literacy onto other cultures. Researchers now argue that the “standard” is itself a cultural artefact, not a universal given, so that in effect educators are imposing relatively narrow, personal conceptions of literacy upon culturally diverse learners who have other conceptions of literacy. Critiques of this culturalist viewpoint could argue that perpetuating local practices are not appropriate in a modern world where high communicative skills are required, including formal literacy. It might also be seen as simply receiving a lower quality education. The problem with this criticism is that it assumes that the current forms of literacy are fixed, universal and given, where in fact they have been culturally and historically constructed. The knowledge which both the instructor and the learner have of the language is important and since there is a close relationship between language and culture, the cultural background of the learners should be taken into account when teaching and learning is taking place.

The current student demographics do not look like, think like, act like or have the same desires as the students of the past. They are significantly different in their age distribution, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, range of educational levels, diverse social backgrounds, inclusion of persons with disabilities and diverse values and attitudes. These characteristics “translate into portraits of diversity” students who bring different resources and perspectives into the academic institution and who have distinctive needs, preferences, expectations and lifestyles. "Multiculturalism." This has resulted in the development and implementation of multicultural education which has become an important approach in culturally diverse classes. "Multiculturalism" recognises and accepts the rightful existence of different cultural groups and views cultural diversity as an asset and a source of social enrichment rather than as a handicap or a social problem. Moreover, "multiculturalism" encourages a process of acculturation whereby peoples cultures are
shared and become modified and enriched through interaction. Multicultural programmes should not be add on, adjuncts to unconstructed pedagogy to satisfy governments’ call for multiculturalism. Such programmes do not effectively address injustice and inequality in the curriculum. The process of affirming diversity must be a collective and collaborative effort. The notion of affirming diversity is also grounded on “ubuntu” or “humaneness”. This view is also strongly supported by Murray (1999:8), who refers to a speaker who pointed out at a philosophy conference on Racism and the Challenges of Multiculturalism, that “tolerance” was condescending to the person tolerated. In his words, “difference tolerated is difference denied”. He argued instead for a policy of engagement and respect. Murray suggests that learning an African language through relationships in community can provide a context in which to address multiculturalism. Communication and culture are inseparably linked. Language, while being a product of culture, is simultaneously a screen for cognition and influences what the speaker perceives and the way in which he/she perceives it. This is also maintained by Landon (1999) who believes that educators need to be introduced to the positive role of languages as media of learning. Landon is of the view that any difficulties of linguistic access have to be handled at a structural or pedagogical level by removing barriers to participation by individuals or groups of learners.

Curriculum developers must be aware of the limits of strategies that take the institution’s model of literacy as given, and instead show the merits of recognising the diversities and dynamics of social literacies within a multicultural student population whose origin of literacy is not necessarily in the institution but in other forms of social practices. Social literacy in the context of this article refers to the practices of reading and writing or print literacy. The concept focuses on literacy as social practice, as concrete human activity. The focus is not just on what people do with literacy, but also their understandings of what they do, the values they give to their actions, and ideologies and practices that encapsulate their use Gee; Lo Bianco (2000). Street and Grillo as cited by Prinsloo and Breier (1996) see communicative practices as the social activities through which language or communication is produced, including the way in which these activities are embedded in institutional settings. This does not mean that curricula have only to be based on recontextualisations of students’ everyday experiences and practices. This will obviously have limitations in so far as it assumes that everyday practices and experiences have direct relevance to curricula and direct application in the workplace. It is unrealistic to prescribe the content of an academic literacy programme, as practical implementation of the guidelines will need to vary from discipline to discipline across the curriculum, depending on the demands of each subject discourse, and in response to the particular learner profiles, and the needs of the working environment. One of the greatest challenges facing South African educators at vocational training institutions is to determine which of the many possible skill ranges presented in textbooks on literacy best fits the profiles of the diverse learners with whom we work. A heterogeneous South African classroom is where some learners already well educated and literate in their native language may be in classes with preliterate learners who have not spent much time in school. It is very difficult and a sensitive issue to specify student’s initial language level on entering an academic study programme. The vagueness in specifying a student’s prior language ability, a direct result of the broad and elastic definition of literacy used in policy and practice, presents a challenge for educators in South Africa. As transformative practitioners, we must be able and willing to reflect upon the ideological principles that inform our teaching practice and connect pedagogical theory and practice to wider social issues. Good instructors adopt an investigative, enquiring attitude to their work, and to what goes on in their classrooms. Instructors should be encouraged to undertake their own reflective research in their classroom contexts. According to Allwright and Bailey (1999), what actually happens in the classroom, not what is planned, is crucial to language learning. Language is not “context free”, “the sense of a word is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our conscious by the word… The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense” (Machet 1991:92). Knowledge of the processes that govern what happens in the classroom is imperative. “Mastering a discipline at tertiary level is as much a matter of acquiring the language of the academic community as it is of learning the content” (Orr 1995:189).

WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION/LITERACY

Changing technology and changing world markets mean that organisations have to be lean, flexible creative, innovative and risk taking. This industrial change has placed new demands on workers for increased skills in language, literacy and numeracy. According to research conducted by Alamprese (1993), the more that workplace literacy instruction approximates the tasks that must be performed in a workplace, the greater the likelihood that students in a programme will be able to learn the skills needed to perform these tasks. Studies have shown that the ultimate success of a workplace literacy programme depends in part, on an instructional approach that goes beyond the teaching of specific skills needed for specific workplace tasks. Instead, the curricula used should focus on the teaching of transferable skills that can be applied in a variety of work contexts. In this way their ability to cope with diverse tasks will be strengthened. If communication is to be the product
of language teaching, then it seems reasonable that it needs to be included in the process as well (Maurice 1987:9). It is not only the content of the materials but also the style of the teaching that determines the effectiveness of classroom learning. Although we focus on content, purpose, and task as the primary subject matter in language teaching, this in no way reduces the importance of the fundamental problem of how to teach language forms. It is not just how to organise content and task, but also how to ensure the simultaneous, efficient acquisition of essential elements of the language code.

Our approach to teaching English at ML Sultan Technikon is primarily the communicative and content based approaches. The integration of language and content involves the incorporation of content material into language in order to provide for comprehensible input to limited language proficiency (LEP) learners in content classes. This is rewarding for students as long as they need to build survival competence, but these approaches inadvertently deny learners the language skills they want and need, with learners grappling with basics like grammar and construction of sentences. The contextualisation provides situational and language background necessary to learn English. However, we do not have the time to wait until learners reach a certain proficiency level before including content areas, we would like to think that they are more likely to reach that proficiency level faster with a focus on content. It should be pointed out that the content based approach does not necessarily ignore form. Apart from this, our content based teaching represents an effort to link classroom instruction with workplace practices that learners would eventually find themselves in. Most of us would agree that a second language is learned not so much by direct instruction in its rules as by using it in meaningful contexts. In view of the limited time instructors have to develop communicative skills in their learners, language is viewed not merely as a means of communication but as a medium of learning. The teaching of language is not done in isolation from subject matter, it is integrated with content learning whenever possible. This means liaising closely with other subject lecturers when designing student projects and assigning tasks. Both the ESL learner and the classroom instructor need orientation training in order to facilitate communication between them, and to foster mutual adaptation to the cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom. Current research in the field of academic literacy and the role of language, focus on language and literacy development being integrated into the curriculum of the mainstream subjects. As the reading and writing practices which students need to learn are specific to their discipline, these discipline specific literacies are most effectively learned in conjunction with course content. In an integrated approach, the literacy demands of the discipline become an explicit part of the subjects that students study leading to meaningful learning for learners. Perhaps a more pragmatic approach should be followed when teaching strategies are planned for a diverse student population, as all learners do not maintain a common knowledge accessing mode. As part of transformation at ML Sultan Technikon, and with a view to assisting first year students in academic literacy and life skills, the Department of Educational Development in a joint partnership with the Curriculum Development Department at ML Sultan Technikon, introduced The Core Curriculum (CC) WIN 101 programme in 1999. The CC is delivered by academic staff in Educational Development, team teaching with staff in the various academic departments over two periods (double) per week. The project given to each group of students is specific for the subject, to which the core curriculum is linked, with the learners working in small groups researching the tasks set out. The topics covered in the CC vary from department to department. Departments select topics from the following list: Time Management, Effective Learning, Effective Note Making, Word Processing, Assignment Writing, Effective Presentations, Cultural Diversity, Reading Skills, Argument and Debate, Effective Thinking, Effective Note Taking, Information Retrieval, Use of Spreadsheet, Examination Preparation, Basic Numeracy, Gender Awareness and Effective Studying, Cooperative teaching and learning, and a team teaching approach are used in implementing CC WIN 101. The CC programme is voluntary, and does not enjoy a credit value at present. This course comprises the following modules: Language Awareness, Academic Literacy Skills, Computer Literacy, Information Retrieval Skills and Personal Development. CC WIN 101 was successful because of the cooperation and commitment of the departments. Lecturers integrated relevant aspects of the Core Curriculum into their discipline. The CC programme is evaluated by means of questionnaires that include a list of topics that the learners rate, as well as individual questions that are answered. There has been overall support for the continuation of CC WIN 101 into 2001 (Core Curriculum WIN 101 Report 2000).

As professionals we need to be aware of the tendency to affirm our own cultural points of view as “normal”. Whether or not our courses are content based, the what, the why and the how of our teaching goals and methods are rooted in a culture, and reflect the dominant ideologies embodied within that culture. Different cultures promote different ways of learning. Culturally preferred learning styles can block a learner from understanding a text. The way in which language is understood and used, will depend on social and cultural factors and these factors will influence the way in which a text is understood. According to Saravanan (1998), the home, family and community allow for a varied set of literacy and cultural practices and these need to be recognised, acknowledged, revived and promoted. One of the challenges facing us in South Africa is how to gauge
the appropriateness of curricular materials for diverse student populations, (majority non mother tongue speakers of English) with specified learning objectives. A further challenge that confronts us is teaching to mixed ability learners. It must be remembered that what goes on outside the classroom in terms of politics, economics and social circumstances will continue to influence what happens inside the classroom. According to an African National Congress (ANC) spokesperson, at a 1992 conference on the reform and restructuring of tertiary education, the use of such terms when describing the language problems amongst learners as “handicapped”, “deficient” and “handicapped”, are stigmatising and exclusionary. It tells us more about the lecturer’s attitudes towards the “problem” than about the “problem” itself. Language attitudes can have a profound effect on the learner’s ability to acquire a second language. A learner’s attitude towards the second language and his/her motivation can also have a profound effect on the success of acquisition. In acquiring a second language or “foreign language” one’s efforts are mediated by what linguist Krashen (1981) has called an “affective filter”, a psychological disposition that facilitates or inhibits one’s natural language acquisition capacities. The learning of a second language is increasingly viewed not as an intellectual or educational experience but as a social psychological phenomenon. Gardner, a social psychologist, as cited by Finegan (1999:570) describes this perspective as follows:

In the acquisition of a second language, the student is faced with the task not simply of learning new information ... which is part of his own culture but rather of acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community. The new words are not simply new words for old concepts, the new grammar is not simply a new way of ordering words, the new pronunciations is not merely ‘different’ ways of saying things. They are characteristics of another ethnolinguistic community. Furthermore, the student is not being asked to learn about them; he is being asked to acquire them, to make them part of his own language reservoir. This involves imposing elements of another culture into one’s own lifespace. As a result the student’s harmony with his own cultural community and his willingness or ability to identify with other cultural communities become important considerations in the process of second language acquisition.

We are commissioned to empower learners politically, economically, socially and morally to become critical thinkers, equipped with problem solving strategies, and to challenge passivity in society. English/Communication classes should focus on process, flexible, open ended curricula, gauging competence and potential, encouraging and rewarding responses, valuing synthesis and intuition Savignon (1991).

Aspirations have important implications for communication, and training learners for industry and employees’ needs and values (which are components of aspirations) are important Retief (1983). Verbal interaction can only be successful if the communication is based on knowledge of the language and language usages of the learners. In learning a second language, one does not necessarily learn to think in that language. If the management staff in the workplace is familiar with the cultural traditions of their employees, they can be spared many grievances. Unfortunately, the commercial market today does not seem to have a universally applicable intercultural communication programme or text that is suitable for culturally diverse student populations. To compensate for the lack of intercultural material, instructors need to develop their own intercultural courses that meet local standards of acceptability. There is a definite need according to Gomez (1988), to develop a global viewpoint that would focus on among other things, awareness of common goals and aspirations as well as respect for different value systems of other cultures. Intercultural communication education should focus on what happens to the message when the participants are from different cultural backgrounds. I believe that other subject instructors, not only English teachers, can improve cross cultural understanding by being the change agents for developing awareness in their learners about the need for and usefulness of knowing about other learners, whose beliefs, values and attitudes are different from their own. The end result could be a set of valuable skills that would assist them to be better informed and aware learners, consumers or employees as well as more sensitive and empathetic to cultural deficiencies. It should be the responsibility of all instructors, not only English language instructors to expand the visions of their learners by helping them develop the knowledge and skills that will make them more effective communicators in culturally and linguistically diverse environments. If we are to assist our learners to overcome their failure to compete successfully in the global marketplace, we as professionals “must be prepared to meet and deal effectively with counterparts from other cultures, and with market conditions throughout the world” (Grandin 1988:27). It would appear as though workers are not difficult to find and hire, but professionals with appropriate communication, social and intercultural skills are a rarity. Research conducted by Holgate (1992) in intercultural studies revealed an overwhelming support for a thorough exposure to the language/s and cultures of the target nation, at least in the sense of its business methods, conventions of negotiation, political sensitivities and general etiquette.

CONCLUSION

The style of learners will vary depending on the skills they inherit from their communities that are directly
related to their survival within the organisation. One cannot pretend that cultural and ideological assumptions are neutral and universal. Educators should suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among their learners until they are able to understand what it means to the learners themselves, and from which social contexts reading and writing, derive their meaning. Literacy must not be seen as simply a neutral skill practised in the same manner all over the world. Educators must explore the notion that there are different literacies, usually an interaction, those that are experienced by learners within their communities and those that are found within an institution, and find ways to bridge the gap (Prinsloo & Breier 1996). An important way to make teaching and learning more effective in a diverse classroom is to broaden the base of teaching examples so that they are pluralistic and diverse. This cannot be achieved without knowledge of the value systems of the learners, their traditions, learning styles, their communication patterns and interpersonal interactions. I am suggesting that when people develop a better understanding of intercultural differences, they begin to strengthen their own communication skills. Clearly, there is very little that anyone does that is not influenced or affected by communication, yet it is often the area where the greatest difficulties are experienced. Good educational practice today requires instructors to build upon what learners bring to class, to listen, not just deliver and to respond to local articulation of “need”. It is the dynamic relationship between local and central, between specific literacy skills focussed on immediate tasks and generic skills transferable to other situations that is the focus of policy and programme design at technikons in South Africa. Mammen (1995:186) states very aptly that:

Developing human capital without knowing the contexts in which it is to be employed may lead to social dislocation. Human capital that is educated but that cannot compromise with the undercurrents of multicultural contexts of its nation not only does not provide for its growth, but on the contrary attempts to undermine its grassroots.

REFERENCES


